

Pennsylvania Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (PA CREP)

Wildlife Habitat Fact Sheet



Native warm-season grass planting (CP2)



Streamside buffer planting (CP22)

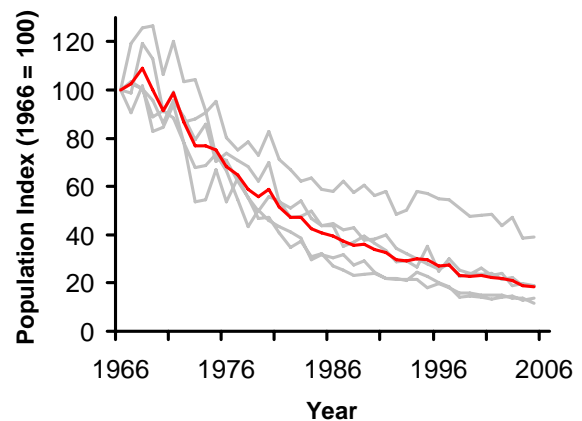
PA CREP

The Pennsylvania Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (PA CREP) is a partnership of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania that started in 2000. In addition to the standard objective of reducing soil erosion on cropland, the PA CREP has two other primary objectives: improving water quality and improving wildlife habitat. The wildlife habitat objective is targeted specifically to grassland habitats for declining grassland dependent wildlife. This fact sheet addresses this wildlife habitat objective.

Targeted Wildlife Habitat

Grassland wildlife targeted by PA CREP has been in steep decline over the past forty years. This is a group of wildlife traditionally associated with agriculture. One group of wildlife representing traditional "farm wildlife" is grassland birds, such as the Eastern meadowlark, ring-necked pheasant, and several "ground sparrows," such as grasshopper sparrow, savannah sparrow & vesper sparrow (lighter lines in graph).

PA GRASSLAND BIRD POPULATION INDICATOR



Source: Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Surveys, 1996-2006. USGS, Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, Laurel, MD

This group of wildlife is dependent on grassland habitat for nesting and rearing their young. The nesting and brood-rearing season for these birds ranges from the beginning of April through July across Pennsylvania. Nest destruction by haying and mowing during these months is the primary reason for the drastic decline of grassland bird populations in Pennsylvania.

Mowing Restrictions

To prevent habitat loss during the nesting and brood rearing season for these grassland birds, the PA CREP specifically restricts mowing from April 1st to July 31st (the mowing restriction in early PA CREP contracts ends July 15th). However, this mowing restriction does not start **until adequate vegetation is established**. In addition to this seasonal mowing restriction, all grassland CREP contracts only provide for rotational mowing **after July 31st**, typically allowing only one-third of a field to be mown each year. Streamside buffer contracts do not allow even this rotational or conservation mowing once the trees and shrubs are established (generally the third year).

Competing Vegetation

The word 'weed' implies something negative. Not all plants growing in PA CREP fields or streamside buffers which were not planted are weeds. Many of these plants provide important wildlife habitat.

Beneficial plants provide shelter or cover for wildlife, including nesting, brood-rearing, escape (from predators), and thermal (winter) cover. These plants are also 'host plants' for many forms of insects. This is important because insects are the primary food for young birds, even for birds that eat seeds and grain as adults. Broadleaved plants generally host a wider variety of insects than grasses. High quality wildlife habitat is provided by a diverse mix of plants, including both grasses and broadleaved plants.

Both problem plants and beneficial plants can compete with the plants sown or planted in PA CREP fields or streamside buffers. This is especially true during the establishment period for seedlings. This is the reason the mowing restrictions in PA CREP do not begin **until adequate vegetation is established**.

Table 1.

Beneficial Plants	Noxious and Invasive Plants
asters	NOXIOUS
blackberries	Canada thistle
blue vervain	multiflora rose
boneset	purple loosestrife
buttercups	
common mullein	INVASIVE
common ragweed	autumn olive
daisies	bindweed
daisy fleabane	common reed (<i>Phragmites</i>)
dogbane	garlic mustard
goldenrods	honeysuckles
ironweeds	Japanese barberry
Joe Pye weed	Japanese hops
milkweeds	Japanese knotweed
Queen Anne's lace (wild carrot)	Japanese stiltgrass
raspberries	morning glory
rushes	reed canarygrass
sedges	spotted knapweed
smartweeds	tall fescue
sumacs (native)	tree-of-heaven (<i>Alnus</i>)
sunflowers	

Managing for a healthy, vigorous stand of the plants seeded or planted is one of the best ways to overcome competing vegetation. This includes managing soil acidity and nutrient levels (nitrogen, phosphorous, and potassium), judicious use of herbicides, and timely mowing. Judicious use of herbicides often means 'spot-spraying' instead of broadcast spraying -- spraying the entire field. Timely mowing does not mean frequent mowing. Timely refers to mowing at the right growth stage of the competing vegetation. Timely mowing reduces both fuel use and 'wear and tear' on equipment!

Note: Herbicides may be applied at any time. However, after adequate vegetation is established **any** mowing before August 1st must be pre-approved by the USDA-FSA County Committee. Such approvals are made **only for** the year requested.

Good Plants & Bad Plants

The table shows two groups of plants. Both can be competing vegetation. One group is plants that are beneficial as wildlife habitat. The other group is noxious or invasive plants. The noxious and invasive plants are **very** competitive and prolific. They also are not native to the United States.

While noxious and invasive plants need to be controlled, there is no need to attempt to eradicate the beneficial group from PA CREP fields and streamside buffers. These beneficial plants may need to be suppressed during the establishment period to allow the planted vegetation to develop. Eliminating this group will not improve wildlife habitat. Instead, this beneficial group of plants will actually **improve** the wildlife habitat once any planted vegetation is established.